

Laying on of Hands

Sometimes there simply are no words. Before deep sorrow, ecstatic joy, profound awe or intense love, ordinary words give way to music, to dance, to silence. We sit with a loved one near death, or grieve with a friend in her loss, and all we can do is silently touch a hand. A mother gazes quietly into the eyes of the contented baby she holds in her arms, and it is enough. Lovers linger in a silent embrace, listening only to each other's heartbeats, and time stops.

In our sacred rituals, there are many times when words cannot convey the deep mystery being celebrated. At those moments, the ritual often prescribes the laying on of hands, a slow, deliberate placing of the presider's hands on the top of the head of the person on whom our prayers are focused. The touch that humans naturally use to sooth and forgive becomes a symbol of God's healing and forgiveness in our sacramental rites. The welcoming embrace and fond touch of the face become the touch of the hand prescribed at baptism and confirmation, and at the same time it is the touch of God's Holy Spirit, transforming and empowering all that is touched.

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